

Cultural Based Sequencing Rules in Conversation: A comparative study between English and Japanese

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Abstract: Communication styles in different cultures affect rapport building in intercultural conversations. This paper looks at English and Japanese conversations, paying particular attention to the overall listener responses in those conversations. It is found that there are different sequencing rules between English and Japanese. These differences affect the communication as well as rapport building between native speakers and non-native speakers.

1 Introduction

Even in multilingual environments, it is often the case that people use a dominant, common language when they are conversing. As there are differences in culture, there are differences in the communication styles that native speakers themselves are not necessarily conscious of, and these could easily culminate in negative evaluations of one another. One area in which such subtle yet unequivocal differences surface is the way an auditor reacts and/or responds to an utterance in conversation.

The purpose of this paper is to find out the cultural based sequence rules in conversations. The overall sequences in four conversations in multicultural environment are analyzed minutely and the apparent differences are pointed out and illustrated.

2 Previous studies

English is said to have sequencing rules in talk. According to Sacks, English has chaining rules and a lot of devices to continue conversations, for example, adjacency pair, jokes, address terms, appositive, “eh” things, ‘well’, ‘you know’, or appositive question. In Leech and Svartvik (2002: 187-190), linking signals are categorized for presenting meanings in connected discourse. Although they focus on linking signals, they clarify the stages in writing and speaking when people connect their ideas. They are: Making a new start or a transition, Changing the subject, Listing and adding, Reinforcement, Summary and generalization, Explanation, Reformulation. In Shigemitsu (2008), it is found that Japanese native speakers do not always feel that they must say something in the conversation and that they do not feel being isolated even when they are just listening.

3 Data and Analysis

3.1 Data of the conversational groups

The data are selected from nine groups which researchers in Politeness Research Group in JACET Chubu have collected since 2003. The conversation groups and participants in the selected data are coded as shown in table 1. The conversations of Group 1 and Group 3 were conducted in English and the conversations of Group 8 and Group 9 were conducted in Japanese.

There are four participants in each group. Two of them are native speakers (NS) of the language of the

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conducted language of each conversation and other two are non native speakers (NNS). The participants met the following criteria:

- 1) Non-native participants in English conversations were not familiar with the Japanese language, custom and culture.
- 2) Japanese participants had relatively higher English skills either with English proficiency certification, a high score record of TOEIC, TOEFL test or other English proficiency test, or be a graduate of one of the top-rank Universities in Japan.
- 3) All participants had not met before.

The conversations were recorded with two digital video cameras and several audio recorders (cassette tape recorders and MD recorders). The participants in Group 1 were given the topic ‘Organize an Invitation Party for Foreign Students’ and the other three of the groups were given the topic “Free Talk about Your Experiences of Cultural Differences”. Researchers tried to focus the spontaneity in the conversation, so they did not give them any particular question or any agenda to facilitate their conversation. The researchers gave each group 30 minutes for recording and stayed in the same room during the recording session in order to check the recording equipment.

Table 1

Group	language used	Native language	Total no. of participants	Participant codes
1	English	2 NSJ, 2 NSE	4	J1, J2, E1, E2
3	English	2 NSJ, 2 NSE	4	J4, J5, E4, E5
8	Japanese	2 NSJ, 2 NSE	4	J9, J10, E6, E7
9	Japanese	2 NSJ, 2 NSE	4	J11, J12, E8, E9

Immediately after each of the 30-minute recording sessions, the researchers had a following-interview session with each participant separately. Participants were asked what they feel during the conversation or asked whether it was a favorable or not. Table 2 shows that conversations were favorably accepted or not by the speakers based on the comment from each participant in the following-up session. Table 2 shows how participants felt in each group felt during the conversation.

Table 2 (J=Japanese native speaker; E=English native speaker)

	Language used	J's impression	E's impression
G1	English	favorable	favorable
G3	English	not favorable	not favorable
G8	Japanese	favorable	favorable
G9	Japanese	neutral	neutral

3.2 Sequence organization

3.2.1 Quantitative analysis

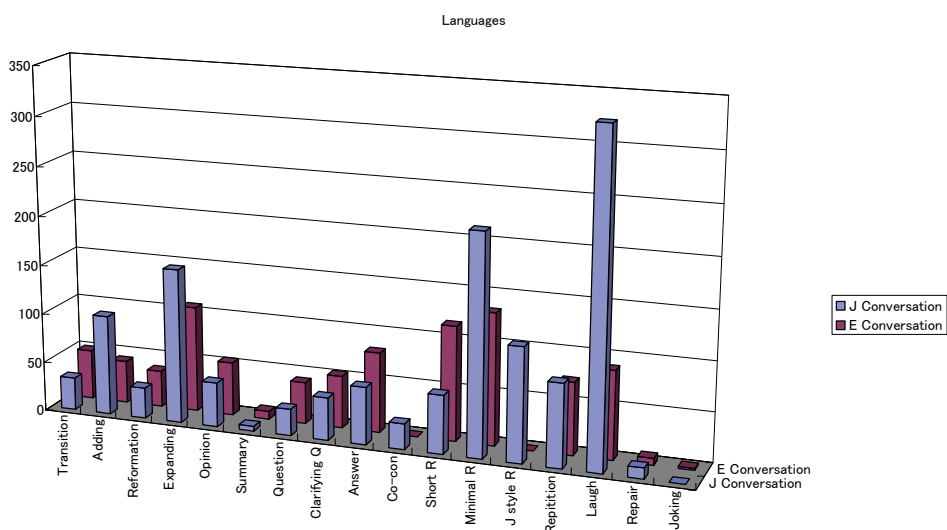
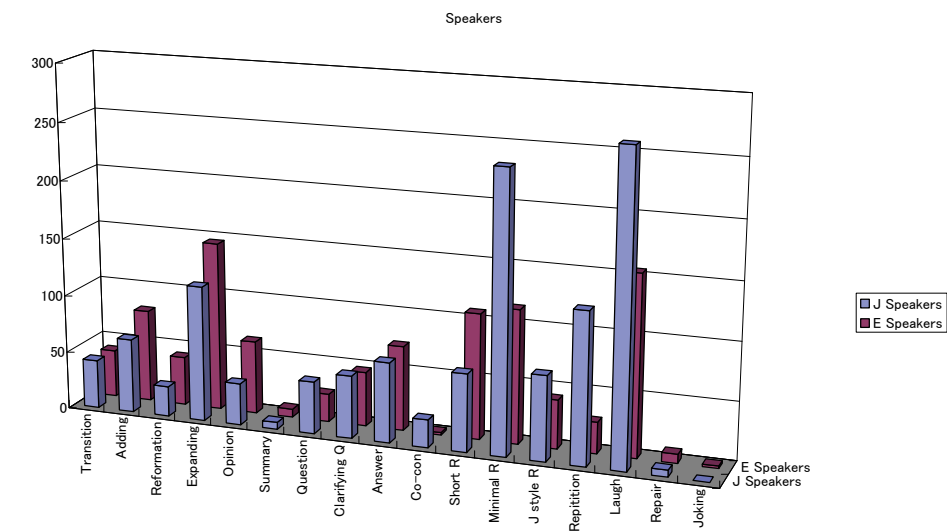
Every turn of each conversation is labeled according to its function and / or its act (See Table 3). These labels are divided into two categories: a category of explicitly conveying information or being related to verbally explicit information and a category of not conveying literal information. We call each of them

messages and meta-messages hereafter.

Table 3 : Turn Labels

messages	Meta-messages
Transition (a new start or a transition, a change of a shift)	Response (a kind of back channeling including 'Oh, I see. OK.. Yeah, yeah. Oh, I understand. In English and 'soudesuka' in Japanese)
Adding (an additional content or a continued utterance, or list which usually connect with 'and' in English or variations of 'sorede' and 'de' in Japanese which indicate the messages are still going on)	Minimal Response (a kind of back channeling including 'Uh huh' and 'uh' in English and 'un' and 'hai' in Japanese.
Reformation (modifying the former utterance by putting them in other words to make their idea clear or the previous utterance seems to be more previous making their ideas sufficient)	Japanese Style Response (For example, <i>Aaa, Hee, Uun, huun</i> , minimal responses with prolonged vowels)
Expanding (an act to expand and clarify the previous utterance by giving a more precise description or giving an illustration, not just adding information as a serial story, but going deeper to give reason, back ground story or giving more detail information)	Repetition (repeating the previous utterance of other speakers)
Opinion (speaker's own opinion, thought or suggestion)	Laughter
Summary (a brief summary of points which are already talked and discussed)	Repair (both correcting other speaker's words and phrases or correcting after pointing it out)
Question (Asking information)	Joking
Clarifying Question (a question or a request which is made by its initiator who has failed to comprehend "the content or form of a previous utterance)	Latter part of co-construction (a fragmental utterance which co-constructs the previous speakers utterance. It is rather meta-messages because this speaker already know the information)
Answer (an answer to the previous question)	

The results are summarized in Graph 1 and Graph 2. Graph 1 is a comparison of the numbers of each act by native speakers of different language.



Graph 1 shows that English speakers add information, reform what they said, expand the previous utterances by giving more details and give their opinion and short responses more often than Japanese speakers. Whereas Japanese speakers give minimal responses, repeat the previous speakers' utterance, laugh and co-construct the previous speaker's fragments.

Graph 2 shows whether these facts are language dependent or not. From this Graph, it is difficult to say that there is a tendency based on the language they speak. For further analysis, cross references of speaker's native language and the language used in the conversation will be needed. But so far, according to Graph 2, it might be said that English environment has more opinion exchanges and question-answer adjacency pairs. Whereas in Japanese environment, we find more acts of adding and expanding information

as well as minimal responses, Japanese style of responses and laughing. Especially, responses, Japanese style of responses and laughing.

It should be noted here that expanding information in English and Japanese are very different. In English, speaker expands information by adding new sentence within his or her turn or next turn. However, Japanese expands information by adding fragment. It is because other speakers give minimal responses by phrase and by phrase. In a way, the speaker is interrupted by minimal responses from other listeners. This interruption are not regarded as negative effect but it regarded as positive effect with which all participants cooperate to provide information with rhythmically inserted minimal responses from the listeners to speakers fragment. This phenomenon also requires further analysis.

3.2.2 Qualitative analysis

In this section, analysis focuses on the speaker's L1. Language environment in multicultural communication is unlikely to affect the conversation at this research stage. (1) and (2) are English conversations.

(1) Group 1: English Conversation

- 1 J1: So, usually, what kind of party do you have?
 2 E1: Ah, like orientation thing? Then probably be ... like a bu, a table, with a bunch of food set out
 3 J1: ***Hm ? Hum.***
 4 E1: **And** you can try on and then, some tables are set out, and so everyone could just come in and get their food.
 5 J2: ***Hmhm.***
 6 E1: **And** start mingling, you know, talking to each other
 7 J1: ***Hmhm.***
 8 E1: **And** then, um, maybe a couple of speakers will talk a little bit of university or stuff like that.
 9 J2: ***Hmhm.***
 10 E1: What do you think?
 11 E2: Ah, most my experience, I'm an art major.
 12 J1: ***Hmhm.***
 13 E2: **Art major.** Yeah, so, most my experience with that sort of thing is like gallery openings
 14 J1: ***Hmhm, ahh***
 15 E2: Or for shows, so I'm thinking, yeah, (inaudible) an' then had plenty of room to stand around and mingle, so you get to know the international students the other, the other *gaijin*.
 16 J1: ⌈(laughter)
 17 J2: | (laughter)
 18 E1: | (laughter)
 19 E2: ⌋(laughter)

In (1), while E1 is talking from line 1 to 9, Japanese native speakers are giving minimal responses. It is interesting to see that English native speakers claims that she is holding her floor and her talk is still going on by putting 'and' just after Japanese participants minimal responses. When E1 is asking question and giving her turn to other participants, the first who answers immediately is E2. When E2 answers in line 11,

J1 is giving minimal response in line 12. After the minimal response, E2 claims his floor by repeating a part of line 11. In this excerpt, it is found that English speakers give their opinions, whereas Japanese participants are giving minimal responses only. It is also found that English speakers challenge to hold his or her floor by showing his or her talk is still continuing by using coordinate conjunction, 'and.' For further research, how sequencing are organized after minimal responses should be clarified.

In (2), J5 is introducing himself. He underestimates his special field saying 'the subject everyone dislikes'. Then E5 denies the under evaluation baldly 'No' in line 2. Moreover, E5 adds 'We love it' with inclusive 'we' in line 4. Further, E4 adds 'Some people have math phobia' in line 5. Those responses by English native speakers show empathy toward J5 and function as building rapport to him. English native speakers do not give minimal responses but positively expand the talk and involve all participants in the talk.

(2) Group 2: English Conversation

- 1 J5: Um, my name is Toshi, Toshi Ueki, and I'm a teacher here, this university. Uh... I teach math, **the subject everyone dislikes.**
- 2 E5: **No.**
- 3 J5: No?
- 4 E5: **We love it.** Yeah
- 5 E4: **Some people have math phobia,** haha.
- 6 E5: That's, un, very deep subject. Algebra? You teach...
- 7 J5: Um... here I teach ah calculus.
- 8 E5: Cal..oh, calculus.
- 9 J5: and Algebra.
- 10 E5: algebra
- 11 J5: yes
- 12 E4: ok..calculus.

On the contrary, different sequence organization patterns are found in the Japanese conversation. (3) and (4) are conducted in Japanese. Notice that two Japanese participants are giving minimal response together. From these evidences, Japanese has some sequencing rules for listeners' responses.

(3) Group 3: Japanese Conversation

- 1 E5: *Aaa, watashi no kanojo wa nihonjin desu.* (Aaa, My girl friend is Japanese.)
- 2 J5: \sqsubset *Aaa, hai* (Aaa, yes)
- 3 J6: \sqsubset *Aaa, sakki* (Aaa, before (=you told us before))
- 4 E5: *Hai, hai, aaa, yoko san desu. An, aaa, Mie-ken kara kimashita.* (Yes, yes, well, she is Yoko san. She is from Mie prefecture.)
- 5 J5: \sqsubset *Aaa*
- 6 J6: \sqsubset *Aaa*
- 7 E5: *Aa, aa, ni-nen mae ni, aa, Toronto daigaku de, aa, benkyou shimashite* (Well, well, two years ago, I studied at Toronto University)
- 8 J5: *Un* (Yes)
- 9 E5: *Benkyo shimashita. Aa, kono-toki, aa, watashi wa aa kanojo to aimashita.* (I studied, well, at that

time, I met her).

10 J5: ┐**Aaa**

11 J6: └**Uun**

12 E5: *Un, aan, aa kanojo kara watashi wa aa nihongo o bennkyo shitakatta desu* (Yes, well, well, From her, I wanted to learn Japanese.)

13 J5: *Toronto daigaku* (Toronto university)

14 J5: ┐**Aa, hai hai**

15 J6: └**Uun**

(4) Group 4: Japanese conversation

1 E8: *Uchi no daigaku de maishu mokuyo wa pabu naito nano de* (Our college has pub night on Thursdays)

2 J8: ┐**Aaa**

3 J7: └**Hee**

4 E8: *Minna pabu e iku* (Everyone goes to the pub)

5 J7: ┐**hahaha**

6 J8: └**hahaha**

7 J7: ┐**hee**

8 J8: └**Tanoshi so (Sounds fun)**

9 J7: ┐**Tanoshi so (Sounds fun)**

10 E8: └**Maishu chotto naa to omoukedo** (Every Thursday is too much, I think)

11 J11: ┐**Un un**

12 J12: └**Un un**

13 E7: *Demo nanka sake wa sekai no bunka to iu kanji nan desu ka* (but somehow alcohol is world culture, isn't it?)

In both (3) and (4), it should be noticed that two of the Japanese participants react together to the previous utterances. Moreover, both of them react similarly, giving minimal responses with prolonged vowels or laughing together. This fact emphasizes that there must be some organizing rules in Japanese conversation. The reaction given by Japanese participants do not have any content of information. Such common reactive actions will create rapport among participants. In line 10, E8 does not react together with J7 although J7 and J8 started together. This means that the particular pattern of Japanese reaction might not be practiced by the English native speaker. Thus Japanese native speakers and English native speakers have very different culturally based conversational styles.

4 Conclusions

This paper examines conversations in which native and non-native speakers participate in one language. The paper specifically looks into English and Japanese conversations from a conversation management strategy perspective, highlighting how much transfer from one's native language has taken place when speaking in a second language and the overall effect such transfer has on the conversation in terms of rapport building among the participants. Japanese and English have different sequence organization and rapport building system. Japanese speakers' reactions tend to use metamessages for building rapport. English speakers create rapport on communicative level.

This paper also suggests research questions for future study. First we must distinct the effect of language environment in the conversation or effect of L1 in multicultural communication. For further analysis, cross references of speaker's native language and the language used in the conversation will be needed. Second, different responses to minimal responses should be clarified. Japanese speaker's frequent minimal responses will be annoyed by English native speakers as shown in (1). The English native speaker does not react as the Japanese native speaker does. There should be different sequence organization between English and Japanese.

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Appendix

This paper is based on a part of the presentation 'Listener responses and their impact on intercultural communication: Same phenomena, different rules.' presented by Yuka Shigemitsu at AILA, Essen, Germany, 26 August 2008.

Graph1

Graph2